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ABSTRACT

Five brief articles from a journal published by the Public Affairs Department of the University of Natal, South Africa, discuss issues related to empowering adults through literacy education in that country. "Meeting Needs" (Gwyneth van Heerden) describes the extent and nature of adult illiteracy in South Africa and the activities of the literacy support service of the Center for Adult Education at the University of Natal. "Read for Life" (Tania Spencer) describes a course aimed at teaching adults how to read and write in Zulu using the learning/experience method. "A Leg to Stand On" (Vis Naidoo) presents the Learn with Echo project, which provides distance basic adult educational material for a black undereducated readership. "Meeting Needs" (Vis Naidoo) describes the goals and philosophy of the Center for Adult Education's Community Development Education and Training Programme. "Off the Shelf" (Tania Spencer) describes a special library established by the University of Natal's Department of Information Studies and Natal Society Library, which is designed to facilitate community and individual empowerment. (Adjunct ERIC Clearinghouse on Literacy Education) (LET)

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EMPOWERING ADULTS THROUGH LITERACY EDUCATION IN SOUTH AFRICA: ACTIVITIES AT THE UNIVERSITY OF NATAL AT PIETERMARITZBURG

"Meeting Needs" by Gwyneth van Heerden
"Read for Life" by Tania Spencer
"A leg to stand on" by Vis Naidoo
"Meeting needs" by Vis Naidoo
"Off the shelf" by Tania Spencer

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VITAL WORK

If you're reading this, there's something you should know. Around 60% of your fellow South Africans are unable to. That's the estimate of illiteracy in English. Mother-tongue illiteracy is almost as bad: the estimate here, described by some experts as conservative, is 40%. Not being able to read and write prevents millions of adult South Africans from fulfilling their own potential — and from participating in the manifold enrichments of the written word. And for as many literate and semi-literate people, there's another problem: where to find the written information and related skills necessary for full individual and community empowerment. The stories which follow show something of the work being done in these vitally important fields by a handful of dedicated people on the University's Pietermaritzburg campus.

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Meeting needs

How the Centre for Adult Education contributes to adult literacy around Pietermaritzburg

ADULT illiteracy is definitely a massive problem in South Africa, but one long neglected by leaders, politicians, educators and policy makers. Perhaps due to the filtering effects of the 1990 United Nations International Literacy year campaign, and the changing political mood in the country with increasing emphasis on transformation and development, the problem of adult illiteracy has finally begun to feature in the media and on the agendas of persons of influence.

During the second half of 1990, the Centre for Adult Education on the Pietermaritzburg campus conducted a survey of non-formal education in the Pietermaritzburg region. Part of the project was to identify the most urgent educational needs in the local community. Adult illiteracy emerged as an overwhelming problem for individuals, community structures, development workers, trade unions, employers and trainers. They all gave examples of how limitations in basic skills like literacy, numeracy and English language communication hampered the progress of their particular organisation, while individuals spoke of their illiteracy in the context of humiliation and daily struggle.

Statistics on the scale of adult illiteracy are not completely reliable. A conservative estimate is that at least 40% of black adults in South Africa cannot read and write in their first language. Considering that in order to function as a literate person in South Africa (in other words be able to use an autobank, read a newspaper, fill in forms, read a job card at work) it is necessary to read and write in an official language as well, the scale of functional illiteracy is more likely about 70%. Around Pietermaritzburg it is estimated that about half the black adult population can read and write in Zulu, and only about 30% can read and write in Zulu and English.

Both Zulu and English literacy are important. There may be a temptation to dismiss Zulu mother-tongue literacy, but experienced literacy workers consistently say that it is faster and more effective for completely illiterate people to learn to read and write in their mother-tongue, and to learn English at a later stage. Unlike children, adults are already "immersed" in their mother tongue and the phonetic spelling and syllabic structure of Zulu encourages relatively fast literacy acquisition, compared to the complex structures of English.

Adult learners often cite reading and writing letters as strong motives for attending literacy classes, and these intense and personal benefits of Zulu literacy are obvious in the context of migrant labour, great distances in the country and lack of telephone facilities for many people.

Literacy work is seldom simply teaching reading and writing, but may include second or third language instruction, numeracy, oral communication, post-literacy skills like alphabetical order, instruction on administrative conventions like always signing one's name the same way, and basic information on how a modern economy works in order to understand things like income tax, sales tax and inflation.

The non-formal education research showed that in 1990 only about 300 (0,3%) of the 100 000 illiterate adults around Pietermaritzburg were attending literacy classes. Facilities for adult literacy learners are limited and isolated, and no regional programme exists. Common problems in literacy work are the lack of information, teaching and learning materials suitable for adults, teacher training, and easy to read post-literacy material.

The Centre for Adult Education is trying to contribute in each of these areas through the Centre's Adult Basic Education Programme. Components of the programme include the *Echo* project which provides distance education materials for literacy and post-literacy support (see page 34), and an Adult Literacy Support service.

The Adult Literacy Support service functions in the following ways: learners and potential learners are informed of existing literacy classes in the "Learn with Echo" educational supplement, and a newsletter is sent to teachers and interested people on all aspects of literacy work. Literacy and easy reading materials, from literacy organisations all over South Africa, are kept at the Centre and sold to local practitioners at cost. Consultancy advice is offered about setting up learning groups, training, methods, materials and specific problems in literacy work.

Ongoing research is conducted on the scale of illiteracy and literacy work in this region. Later this year, the Centre is hoping to organise teacher training for groups of interested people from different organisations around Pietermaritzburg.

The dominance of only two languages in this region, English and Zulu, is a great advantage to adult literacy work compared to other areas in South Africa. In a city like Johannesburg, learners in one literacy class may come from different language groups, including Zulu, South Sotho, North Sotho, Xhosa and Setswana, while Afrikaans is often the language of the workplace.

This local advantage should be exploited, and hopefully the aim of the United Nations to make the 1990s a decade of literacy will be realised in the Pietermaritzburg region, where the need and the potential certainly exist. ¶

Gwyneth van Heerden (Literacy Support Co-ordinator, CAE)

Read for life

A COURSE aimed at teaching adults how to read and write in Zulu transpired to be as much a lesson in urban living, as it was a lesson in literacy.

Designed for the unskilled and semi-skilled workers on the Pietermaritzburg campus, the course was initiated in 1990 by the Language and Reading Centre at the University's request.

Sandy Land (left) and Mary Godlonton

The facilitators of the project, Sandy Land and Mary Godlonton, deal with people who range in age from 20 years to 60, and varied from those who had genuinely never written a word, to those who had but denied they had, such was their lack of confidence.

The course eschews rote-learning, and is centred rather on the learning/experience method in which the workers generate the text they work on. "We try to concentrate on exercises that are real to them," said Land and Godlonton.

Exercises include reading newspapers, filling in building society forms, finding numbers in the telephone directory, or even navigating hire purchase agreements. Tours of the local post office are an integral part of the literacy course. Apart from the campus workers, the course is also open to workers from the Faculty of Agriculture farm and the Botanical Gardens, as well as a domestic worker and a few gardeners.

"Our project was intended to be a University course totally without agenda. We didn't want to teach literacy because it was some sort of 'upgrading' operation for either religious, political or industrial purposes."

Only when a reasonable level of proficiency in reading and writing in Zulu has been attained are the students taught English — which, said Land, is what they all seem to want.

Because the classes are small, the facilitators are able to work with the students on a one to one basis. "The dilemma is always: when do you consider people to have become literate, when do you leave them? It's not an easy decision," said Godlonton.

Land cautioned that literacy classes were not a panacea for the disenfranchised worker. A higher level of literacy does not guarantee a better job; neither does it mean that because workers can now sign hire purchase agreements, that they are equipped to do so without some guidance.

"We have found that after as many as 20 sessions, only those who had arrived with a fair reading ability were able to cope with newspaper text on the level necessary for real appreciation of what is communicated."

Another difficulty with the project is that although it was set up at the University's request, both Land and Godlonton expressed dissatisfaction at the reluctance of some lower management supervisors to agree to release workers for classes.

Literacy has, however, a price that the facilitators are not shy of. The collision of cultures that happens when a Zulu-speaking person learns written English is something they are sensitive to. Describing it anecdotally, they give the example of one of their students who was dissuaded from starting his telegram with the words "Manje-ke mfowethu" (Now, my brother). "This is what is lost in a society when messages are borne not by people coming from those who sent them, but emerge instead from machines."

Said Land: "Real empowerment would entail teaching oral English. While we would never suggest that literacy be withheld from people who believe they need it, we would like to suggest that protagonists of literacy courses are cognizant of the price paid by at least some of their proteges."

Despite these constraints, Land and Godlonton's belief in the project was reflected in how obviously pleased they were at the "exciting" progress made by one of their students that afternoon. ¶ **Tania Spencer**

A leg to stand on

THE "Learn with Echo" project is a 4-page weekly educational supplement which appears in the *Echo* newspaper, itself a weekly supplement of *The Natal Witness*, a privately-owned English-language newspaper published daily in Pietermaritzburg.

The project, which started publication in September 1990, aims to provide distance basic adult educational material for a black under-educated readership who are unlikely to have further opportunities for formal education. It aims to provide useful, relevant knowledge for adults, using pedagogically challenging methods to help develop a critical consciousness in readers. It also aims to develop fluency in English. In short, the project aims to help empower the powerless.

Topics that have been covered in the supplement thus far include Basic Literacy in Zulu and English, Emergency First Aid, Primary Health Care, Helping Children to Start School and to Read, Study Skills, a Regional History of Natal and Zululand, Life Skills and Easy Reading and short stories. New themes and topics will be dealt with as the supplement develops.

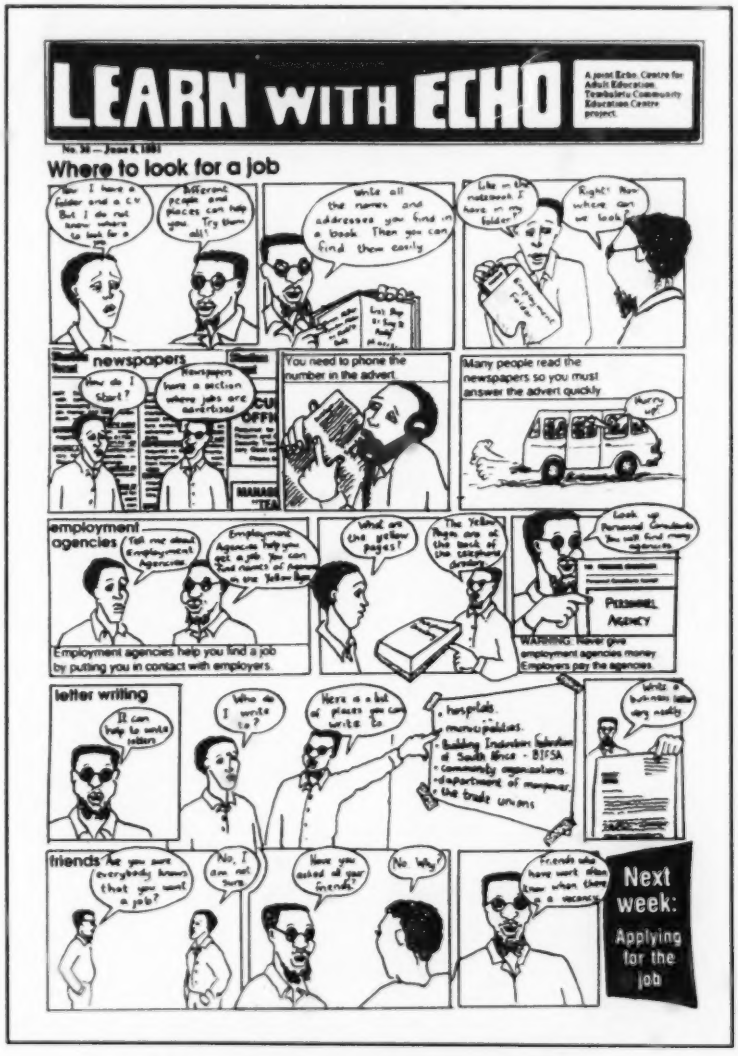
Who is the target readership? The supplement is aimed mainly at black readers who are functionally literate and who have had a bare minimum of formal schooling. It is estimated that this includes about 60% of the black population in this region, many of whom have no formal education at all. (About 34% of the black population in this region are functionally illiterate.) Many of the readers are also unemployed.

"Learn with Echo" is produced at the Centre for Adult Education, a non-state subsidised department of the University of Natal, Pietermaritzburg, and is part of the Centre for Adult Education's Adult Basic Education Programme (Abe). Support for adult literacy is seen as one of the major goals of the Abe programme.

The project employs 4 full-time people and 1 part-time person. This team produces the supplement and conducts research on the materials and their use. The team consists of a writer, a layout and design person, an administrator/co-ordinator and an illustrator. Other writers are commissioned in specialised fields of knowledge from both within the University and outside.

But the Centre for Adult Education is not the only leg upon which the "Learn with Echo" stands. Once the pages are copy-ready they are given a final edit by a team made up of representatives from the *Witness Echo*, Tembaletu Community Education Centre and the "Learn with Echo" project. The Natal Witness Publishing Company then prints and distributes the supplement. About 48 000 copies are put out by the *Witness* every Thursday of which 25 000 copies are distributed free in local and Natal Midlands townships. A further 23 000 copies are sold inside *The Natal Witness*. Tembaletu's role has been to receive and monitor most of the current "Learn with Echo" funds.

Funding for "Learn with Echo" comes from the Canadian Embassy and USAID. The Canadians came forward with an initial amount to get the project started, and the Americans keep "Learn with Echo" rolling.


LEARN WITH ECHO
A joint Echo, Centre for Adult Education, Tembaletu Community Education Centre project
Where to look for a job
newspapers
You need to phone the number in the advert.
Many people read the newspapers so you must answer the advert quickly
employment agencies
Employment agencies help you find a job by putting you in contact with employers.
WARNING: Never give employment agencies money. Employers pay the agencies.
letter writing
friends
Next week: Applying for the job

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"In short, the project aims to help empower the powerless."

The "Learn with Echo" supplement aims at being "user friendly". The layout design of the pages avoids over sophistication. This is to ensure that readers can cope with the level of visual literacy. The font used is larger than that found in regular newspapers. Only the most readable fonts are chosen to facilitate the needs of the readership. The content is supported by the ample use of illustrations. The illustrative style is informed by research that has been done into visual literacy, and it avoids use of complex western conventions. These factors lend themselves to the production of an unthreatening page layout with sufficient white space to rest the eye.

English is a second language for most of the readers. Writers therefore aim at about a standard 5 or 6 second language reading level. However, the language level does vary with the content. Zulu is used selectively. From time to time reader response is encouraged through competitions and letter-writing.

The project does not stop at materials production. Appropriate research methods are being explored. An extensive readership survey has been planned to establish who reads the "Learn with Echo" and how it is used. Content and design need to be better informed by and more sensitive to the users' needs. Such a survey should also help us find ways to broaden the readership. Another area of research is that of mediation in distance education. The publication address es a mediator (a literacy teacher, helper or a parent), on the literacy page and the "Ukufunda ekhaya" children's page. Research needs to be done to evaluate how effective this method is. Research is also required into the language level as well as the appropriate usage of English or Zulu. ¶ **Vis Naidoo**

Meeting needs

THE Centre for Adult Education has developed its Community Development Education and Training Programme (CDETP) as a result of extensive consultations with organisations and individuals on the need for community education to empower people.

As a result of these consultations, the Programme concentrates on developing various education and training courses. These are aimed at providing skills to members of community and welfare organisations, trade unions and non-governmental organisations and projects.

The Centre sees the development of organisations within the community as crucially important. As a proactive department within the University, it is are engaged in the training of members of these organisations in the various skills that are needed to effectively and efficiently run them. The CDETP consisted of two part-time year courses for 1990. The first was the 'Project Management Course'. This looked at the skills that are needed to run a community project. The second was the 'Training of Community Trainers/Educators' course. The focus here was on training community educators who themselves could be involved in educating others.

This year the Programme has changed with only the 'Training of Community Educators/Trainers' course being part-time for the year. A media training course has also been developed which consists of a series of workshops on different aspects of media. Some of these include press relations, making media work for your organisation, design and layout, poster and banner making, writing and editing skills, and using media for meetings.

A second series of workshops has been developed which focuses on various organisational skills that are crucial to running an effective, efficient and democratic organisation. These workshops include basic bookkeeping, writing project proposals, designing educational events, evaluations, writing minutes and reports, filing, chairing meetings, and so on.

The CDETP is also available to organisations and projects which can commission it to run various workshops on the differing skills required by the various organisations.

These components of the CDETP run by the Centre for Adult Education (UNP) are seen as crucial by the staff of the Centre for the development of well-organised and empowered community organisations and trade unions.

The Centre also offers computer literacy courses through its Clip (computer literacy programme) project. The courses are designed to introduce members of community projects to computers and word processing packages, help in the establishment of their computer systems and offer a consultancy service for their computer problems.

Clip's main objectives are to monitor the information processing, database, social research and computerisation needs of community and worker-based organisations, to help in the setting up of appropriate computer facilities for such organisations, and to assist in the training of people to use such facilities on as wide and popular a basis as possible. ¶ **Vis Naidoo**

"The process of self-help relies on access to information."

Christine Stilwell (left) and Ann Brann

Off the shelf

MOST people do not use standard public libraries. These libraries are either inaccessible or do not have a stock of books relevant to the experience of many communitites.

Having realised the importance of making libraries accessible to all, the University's Department of Information Studies and the Natal Society Library established the Pietermaritzburg Resource Centre Library (PRCL) in 1987. The initiative from within the University was born of the feeling that they — the Department itself and libraries in general — were only reaching a priviliged group of people and needed to be more community-oriented.

Christine Stilwell, a lecturer in the Department, expressed it in this way: "Our intention was very definitely to attempt to facilitate community and individual empowerment. With all the violence in the townships, it was incredibly hard to get to these communities. And while it would be ideal to establish resource centres in the townships, this initiative (the establishment of the PRCL in the city centre) could be a solid foundation on which to build."

Ann Brann, the Resource Centre librarian, added that the big libraries in the City (the University of Natal Library, the Natal Society Library, and the Natal Provincial Library Services) had been extremely supportive of the PRCL. "The close co-operation between these big libraries and community resource centres is a very important development," she said.

The initial aim of the PRCL was to provide information to the affiliated welfare organisations, but once the needs of various communities began to emerge, Brann was given the mandate to make the resources available to the wider Pietermaritzburg community. Lorette Rayner, also of the Department of Information Studies, said: "What is beginning to emerge is the initiation of a resource-sharing network in the area of community and primary health care information and education."

The PRCL already offers probably one of the largest non-computerised collections of information on Aids in South Africa, and is custodian of Earth Life's increasingly used data base.

The PRCL is used by a variety of people: social workers from the prisons, who need to know how to deal with rapists coping with aggression and stress; teachers researching child abuse; students and pupils researching projects; private people who are dealing with stress, parenting problems, marriage, illness, or rape.

In more formal education, the PRCL provides an experimental library for the advanced diploma students in the Department of Information Studies, where progressive ideas for library initiatives can be translated into a relevant response to communities' needs. The aim is to expose students to community resource needs.

Said Stilwell: "Although there is a putative link between access to information and exercising one's political rights, there is some support for the idea that the process of self-help relies on access to information." ¶

Tania Spencer

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